

Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
“Securing Our Borders: What Have We Learned From
Government Initiatives and Citizen Patrols?”
May 12, 2005

Good afternoon, we are here today to discuss border security. This hearing has been a long time in the making, as it builds on the Committee’s two years of extensive oversight of Customs and Border Protection (CBP), including numerous Committee trips to the southern border and a Subcommittee hearing in Arizona.

Assuring the integrity of our Nation’s borders has always been important, but since September 11, 2001 it has become essential. The primary obligation of any government is the safety and security of its citizens, and to fulfill that obligation, we must first be able to prevent those individuals who seek to do us harm from entering the United States. Our concern is not naïve or misplaced. In addition to the ongoing threat of criminals engaged in human or drug trafficking, recent congressional testimony from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has highlighted intelligence reports suggesting that Al-Qaeda is considering using the southwest border to infiltrate the United States.

Concern for the integrity and control of our borders is far from new, especially along the southern border. This area has long been targeted by the federal government for enhanced security due to the overwhelming volume of illegal crossings. In 1993, a study commissioned by the Office of National Drug Control Policy concluded that the Southwest Border was “being overrun,” estimating that 6,000 individuals attempted to enter the United States illegally every night along a 7.5 mile stretch of the San Diego border. As a result, the Southwest Border Strategy was created, calling for additional personnel, equipment, and infrastructure improvements. The strategy also involved multi-year operations, such as Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, Operation Rio Grande in McAllen, and Operation Safeguard in Tucson to target the most vulnerable and most heavily trafficked border areas at that time.

More recently, on March 16, 2004, in response to the continuing high levels of apprehensions in the Tucson sector, CBP launched the Arizona Border Control (ABC) Initiative, which just recently moved into Phase Two. ABC seeks to coordinate federal, state, and local authorities to control the Arizona border by detecting, arresting, and deterring anyone seeking to enter the country illegally. The Initiative seeks to increase the use of technology and the number of “boots on the ground” to establish a benchmark for resource allocations and commitments in order to gain operational control of the Arizona border.

Despite all of the work of Legacy INS and CBP through these various initiatives, the fact remains that we do not yet have operational control of our borders. These operations have been successful in increasing the number of apprehensions at those

targeted areas of our border. It does not appear, however, that we have been able to translate the lessons learned into a comprehensive plan that shuts down our borders to illegal traffic. In fact, we currently do not even have complete visibility and awareness - there are many points along our borders where the federal government is effectively blind.

Recently, citizens frustrated by the number of individuals entering our country illegally on the southern border have begun to band together and start their own citizen patrols. During the month of April, the Minuteman Project announced the placement of 857 volunteers along the Arizona border. The Project claims their efforts resulted in the apprehension by the Border Patrol of 335 individuals illegally crossing the border, and we will hear more about their efforts today.

Officials within DHS have repeatedly stated that we are moving in the right direction, and I have no doubt that we are. The concern of this Committee, many others in Congress, and the American public is the pace and efficiency of the effort to make progress. We need to move beyond broad policy statements and get down to the facts. How will we know when we have achieved operational control of our borders? How many boots on the ground and cameras in the sky will it take to get there? What are the funding requirements going to be?

Congress needs to hear the hard truths about the state of the border so that we know what we must do to achieve our mission. We need to move beyond discrete initiatives and take what we have learned to create an effective, agile, layered, and comprehensive border security strategy.

There is not only great urgency in addressing these needs, but a vital requirement that we do this *right*. Therefore, we must not only work harder and faster, but smarter. Technology applications such as sensors, cameras, blimps, and unmanned aerial vehicles have the ability to serve as force multipliers, and there is no question we need more of it.

Let me also say this is not the time or the forum to point fingers. Debates about “immigration policy” have no place in this discussion. Whether you favor a more permissive or restrictive stance on immigration, a functioning and structurally sound border is the basic building block of any workable policy.

We hope to learn today about technological advances and infrastructure improvements CBP is currently implementing at the border. We also hope to learn some answers to the question of whether CBP is adequately staffing and training agents at the border. Finally, we hope to address the public’s growing concerns about the capability and will of the federal government to establish operational control of the southern border.